

St. Mary was born in the fifth century and for the first years of her life she lived in her parent's home. Turning twelve, she ran away from home to Alexandria wanting to live as freely and loosely as her heart desired. Seventeen of the next years she spends in the most vile decadence, using her body as the means of supporting herself. But her debasement was not only for financial purposes. She lived this way out of crass enjoyment, often not even charging for the use of her body. She completely forgot about God and had no hopes for salvation.

If Mary forgot about God, God did not forget about her. He waited until the right moment to call her not only to repentance but even to a exalted level of sanctity. Mary saw a large group of people boarding a ship to Jerusalem for the holiday of the Exaltation of the Cross. Using her body as a means of payment to board the ship, she went to Jerusalem thinking to increase even more her bodily pleasures. Once there though, a most amazing thing occurred. Trying to enter into the Church with the mass of people, she alone was prevented from entering by an invisible power. She kept trying until she had to stop out of exhaustion. The shock from what had happened shook her so deeply that she profoundly understood that it was her way of life, her monumental sinfulness that prevented from being able to venerate Christ's cross. In desperation, she pleaded, giving an oath before a icon of the Mother of God which hung on the outside wall of the Church. She promised to change her way of life if she would only be permitted entry. After this prayer, she was able to enter freely.

The change in Mary's soul was permanent. Upon exiting the church, she prayed in front of the same icon of the Mother of God for guidance. A voice from Heaven instructed her to go into the Jordanian desert where she will find redemption. Mary obeyed and upon moving into the desert, remained there for forty-seven years living in total isolation. Her clothes wore out, and she remained unclothed in the desert heat and cold. She subsisted on roots of the sparse plants that grew in that severely arid climate. For the first seventeen years, she was wracked with the overwhelming desire to return to the debauchery of her former life. She would lay on the ground groaning in tearful prayer to God for help. By this, she wiped clean the effects of her seventeen years of debasement.

Afterwards, she was rewarded with twenty years of complete spiritual peace. She achieved such heights that when she prayed, she would be lifted off the ground and float in the air. She was able to cross the river walking on the water as on land. She knew the contents of Scripture by heart, never having read anything because she was illiterate. She even knew about conditions that needed correction in monasteries, never having been in them. Before her death, God sent a saintly elder from one the monasteries to give her Holy Communion. In this way, through him, her life became known to the world.

There are so many lessons we learn from the life of this incredible woman. We see the never-ending love that God has for every single person and His desire to save even the most evil or debased person. Through Mary, we see what makes repentance true repentance. She recognizes and understand her sins. She deeply regrets them and seeks forgiveness. She confirms her repentance by profoundly changing her way of life. She perseveres against a great force trying to return her to her former life, staying faithful and fulfilling her oath to God. We see a person who has placed God as the absolute center of her life, showing us that it is possible to stay faithful to

the first of the ten major commandments given to us by God through the prophet, Moses. She is the essence of humility as even during her last twenty years when she was exalted by God, she continued to view herself as the lowest and basest of sinners.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, God may not be expecting us to accomplish the same kind of spiritual feats that Mary was able to accomplish. But if we even in small measure attempt to follow her incredible example, we will in great measure be increasing our success in our efforts to attain salvation. And since Great Lent is exactly the right time for this kind of effort, may God strengthen us with His divine Grace. But He will only do this if we show Him our sincerity by not only talking, but making an honest effort to bring our life more into conformity with His commandments.

I greet all of you with this wonderful holiday and wish you success in your lenten efforts culminating in the celebration of Pascha when our Lord resurrects, to allow us to also resurrect unto eternal blessed life in Heaven.

With Love in Christ,

Archpriest Serge Kotar